

Samuel Newport

Hog Creek Review

Dogs Were First Domesticated 33,000 Years Ago

Alas, wretched Tantalus, in the middle of the waves, stands there thirsty, and, starving, cannot have the nearby fruit - Alciato

I. Sisyphus Was a Border Collie

The dog won't stop barking. He's a stupid motherfucker and we only got him after Sisyphus died because

my mother never felt right alone

since she was raised with just her grandfather.

But I mean, really-- a fully-grown German Shepherd and he can't so much as sit, come, or stay. Anyway, it doesn't matter since my mother loves him and that's the end of that.

Leave it to my father to
name a dog Sisyphus,
but our neighbors thought he was a bitch
anyway
seeing as we called him 'Sissy.'

I don't know for sure the dog is barking now, I guess. It's only a theory based on the fact he's never stopped unless my mother's around. Well, except that one time, but I'm not going to talk about that.

II. *Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them- Judges 16:26*

It's a beautiful summer morning, which isn't to say I want to start this as some cliché because I don't, but it really is. I wake up early to get the paper from the end of our gravel driveway for my grandfather, who likes for me to read it to him.

I make it through the 'A' part of the newspaper when my father stumbles down for breakfast. He usually makes coffee that entices my mother from outside, where she feeds the dog and sits in the sunshine for awhile. She doesn't come by the time I get to section 'C.' I fold the newspaper and go see if she's by the doghouse.

I can see my mother's feet sticking out by the doghouse. I forgot that she painted her toenails whimsical shades of orange and yellow two days before.

Summer colors, she'd said before asking to experiment on my toenails so hers would turn out right. Though mine turned out nicely too.

Her small toes are individually discernable in the morning sun of Ohio. One black sandal still on, the other halfway across the yard.

The dog still won't stop barking.

III. My Grandfather Lost His Index, Middle, and Pinky Fingers At The Steel Mill Two Years Before Retirement

I only started noticing the shape of my father after my mother first got sick. He and

my grandfather are both big men, but my grandfather is tall and broad. In Sunday school I can't remember how, but I always imagined

my grandfather as the cross Jesus hung on because
he's that kind of tall and broad, you know. Proud of it.
As for my father:

it's like watching a small telescope forced back together. You know it's supposed to go that way and it knows that too, but it doesn't want to.

And though the important thing
to remember is that it's because he
makes himself that way, I remember thinking how important it was when my grandfather
lifted my mother up from beside the doghouse, resting her on his shoulder. And my father
couldn't.

That's what my father is. A big man collapsed in on himself.

But anyway, even though the dog hadn't shut up at that point (does he ever?) when I
saw my father's shape for the first time after my mother got sick it was like the dog *had* shut
up for once, even though he hadn't.

IV. The Family Argument Centers On Whether Or Not Delilah Is Guilty Regarding Samson's Hair

I know I've mentioned Sunday school, but my family's not much religious. We know
the stories and sometimes we go to church, but it's not the same, you know.

My mother maintains Delilah's innocence

(or a lack of guilt, though she thinks they're the same).

Samson was an asshole too.

My father says she *knew what she was doing, didn't she?*

Being a woman doesn't preclude you from consequences.

His eyes are shaded as he says this and his shoulders are hunched
as he looks at my mother,
who avoids his gaze.

My grandfather asks about his car first, then yells at

the dog to shut the fuck up. He taps his bottom lip with a cigar.

I'll tell you what I think. I think we're dealing with a serious threat here.

V. In Which Cancer and Tumor Are Not Interchangeable Terms

My mother spends awhile in the hospital. At first they don't seem to care what's wrong (that's what we get for being poor), but it got to the point where I wish more for not caring than the kind of caring too much, though most of that comes later.

After a day of fucking around they say
We'll try it and they stuck her in an MRI
or a CAT scan.

I can't remember which. She asks me
to hold her hand.

I am conveniently in the cafeteria at the time they come for her. When I slink back into the room the doctor is there. When my father asks if it's brain cancer, his eyes shift down. I could see his muscles contracting, pulling in on themselves, his shape concave.

The doctor's small dark eyes look down too.

VI. *Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven-* Judges 16:22

When they come for her, they bring sharp razors, scissors, a travel sized can of shaving cream, and sympathetic smiles. I feel about the same for them and that dog that won't shut up, but finally had.

Suddenly my father is no longer contracted. His shape becomes convex, pulled out, somehow *there*.

"I'll do that," he says. They sit side by side on her hospital bed. She leans on him, her back on his chest and head resting where his arm meets his shoulder, and he trims the place they tell him to, carefully spreading some shaving cream on it and then pulling out a cheap razor blade. He nicks her skull slightly; his fingers come away with the taint of blood on the tips.

Am I precluded from the consequences? my mother asks.
He was an asshole too, my father answers, pressing a small gauze pad to the nick.

VII. My Father Finally Names The Dog

After they take her away we go to the gift shop where my father asks for some of the ribbon they use for balloons.

In the surgery waiting room, he kneels on the floor next to a cheap, battered coffee table-- the faux wood is chipped and the top scuffed, but this is his altar.

A few locks of my mother's hair are carefully laid down
as he ties them together tightly. He watches me watching him.

There is no such thing as a wretched Tantalus. And a pause.

You need to try the Romans, Jim.

He presses the tips of his fingers to his lips and then lifts himself into the chair.

VIII. It's My Mother's Fault We Don't Own Any of Lucretius's Works

Going home isn't the hard part. It's easy to load up the car, smiling and pretending like everything's alright. Laughing and joking the whole ride home.

We stop at my mother's favorite restaurant on the way home and if she didn't still have that bald patch near the crown of her scalp I'd have no problems pretending.

The dog is happy to see her. When we pull in he starts barking, fiercer than ever, but the first thing my mother does is take my father's arm and lean on him, going into the backyard. As soon as she enters the privacy fence and kneels down, he bolts over, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and anxiously sniffing her all over. It's kind of sweet until the asshole ruins it by hearing some kids ride by on their bikes and begins running around in a giant circle, barking his head off.

"I tried," my mother says with a laugh.

I start reading some Romans from my father's bookshelf. I take the books with me when my mother drives to her chemotherapy appointments and read them out loud to her while she has her treatments. She lays back in the chair and closes her eyes, but I know she never falls asleep.

Even though I read through a few books of the Romans I never do find what my father had said that day in the waiting room. My mother wants to know too since my father went and named the dog Tantalus.

Every time

I call to feed him there's a bad taste in my mouth.
I like the Romans better than the Greeks, after all.

"At least I know who Sisyphus is," she says, leaning back with her eyes closed.

VIII. I Regret My Father's Suggestion That I Learn The Romans

But the thing is that no matter how much I read to her she eventually begins to fall asleep. I push through because I know she wouldn't want me to stop just for that. One of the nurses stops one day and tries to put a hand on my shoulder as I read a hardback.

"She's asleep," she says. And I know she means well by it, but I just shrug.

"You don't want to disturb her by reading?"

I'm silent and resist rolling my eyes. What does this nurse know about my family?

"She likes my reading to her," I say. "It helps her sleep."

The nurse's nostrils flare just a bit I see from where I'm sitting. My mother stirs just a bit.

"Jim, why did you stop?"

The nurse begins to walk away and I look down to find my place. I look over to ask my mother a question and stop to look at her, really look at her, for the first time.

Her hair is thinning, but it's still there, mostly. Her hair is supposed to be dark brown and shiny, unmanageable so that she normally just wears it pulled up. But she doesn't bother anymore, the way it's limp and kind of stringy, almost like she doesn't wash it anymore even though I know she does, even if she usually needs my father to help her. And then there's *that*, needing my father to help her, needing to lean on me, needing my grandfather to sit with her and wipe off her forehead and coax her to eat, which she doesn't bother more often than not, which is why her cheeks are sticking out at angles.

"Jim, do you want to finish that passage?" she murmurs. Her eyes are still closed, her lips barely moving. I feel like

I've been smashed up, like I was something knocked over by an irresponsible child,

shattered on a hardwood floor;

I was put back together, but chipped in places.

My lips move, but I don't say anything.

But she needs me to. She needs me to read to her, to listen to my voice even if she doesn't care about Romans and my father and I do.

I remember not going to hold her hand when she went for an MRI, even though I know now how much it'd cost her to even ask.

"Yeah," I say. "I will-" and I do. I read as admirably as my father would. When we get home, I let her grab a hold of me as she makes her way up the stairs. My grandfather has laundered and replaced the sheets. He is sitting in his chair by my mother's nightstand, eyes closed as he listens to the radio. I hear the shower and know my father is home. He comes in and seems surprised to see me. He helps my mother settle down; she rests her head on his knees. He runs his fingers through her hair.

What right did I have to question the nurse? What do *I* know about my family?

The books on the Romans are still in the car. I climb tentatively onto the bed and lay down beside my mother, taking one of her hands tightly. She looks at me and smiles.

She's not precluded from anything.

I feel hot around my eyes and look down. Her other hand rests on the back of my neck.

Too little, too late, I tell myself, despite the smile.

I remember not going to the MRI scan,

I remember not helping her up the stairs, watching her stagger up,

I remember only being able to see the bald patch when she had her real hair.

The sunlight is coming in slanted, throwing bars of light over my parents.

The dog is quiet.